

# **Barriers to VR Service Access and Return to Work Outcomes among African American Veterans: The Need for Evidence- Based Research and Service Strategies**

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Note: This Project was funded by a Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.  
Distinguished Professor Endowed Chair Award

July 13, 2011

# Objectives of this Session

- Participants will achieve a greater understanding of African American veterans' State vocational rehabilitation program access and successful employment outcome rates when compared to the national benchmark/average.
- Participants will gain a greater appreciation for the need for evidence-based research and service strategies to address disparate successful employment outcome rates among veterans of color served by State/Territorial VR programs, the Veterans Administration's VR & E program and community rehabilitation programs.

# Overview

- There are an estimated 22,915,963 veterans residing in the United States.\*
  - An estimated 1,787,444 or 7.8% of these veterans are Global War on Terror (GWOT) veterans.
  - Gulf war veterans number 3,391,559 or make up 14.8% of all veterans.

\* U.S. Census Bureau (2008). *Selected social characteristics in the United States: 2008*. Retrieved from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?\\_bm=y&-geoid=01000US&-qu\\_name=AC](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geoid=01000US&-qu_name=AC).

# Overview

(continued)

- There are 7,745,589 Vietnam war Era veterans representing 33.8% of all veterans.
- African Americans comprise an estimated 10.3% or almost 2.5 million of these veterans.

\* U.S. Census Bureau (2008). *Selected social characteristics in the United States: 2008*. Retrieved from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?\\_bm=y&-geoid=01000US&-qu\\_name=AC](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geoid=01000US&-qu_name=AC).

# Overview

(continued)

- Thousands of military personnel stationed around the world have returned home from active duty with various mental and physical disabilities.
- An estimated 29,978 service personnel have been wounded while participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom from March 2003 through April 2008.\*
- Two wars and the recession have increased disability claims handled by the VA-backlog of one million claims with as many as 400,000 claims from GWOT veterans. \*\*

\* National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. *Notice of Proposed Long- Range Plan Range Plan for Fiscal Years 2010-2014*; 77 (10), page 2564-2569. (January 15, 2009).

\*\* Pitts, B. (Producer). (2010, January 3). *CBS 60 Minutes* [Television broadcast]. New York: CBS Broadcasting Inc.

# Overview

(continued)

- Many of these veterans continue to turn to the Federal-State VR program for assistance in finding employment.
  - United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Employment Program (VR&E or Chapter 31 Program)
  - The 56 State and Territorial Public Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies
  - Community Vocational Rehabilitation Programs, (e.g., VA Vendors, Goodwill Industries, Workforce Centers).

# The Problem

- To date, relatively little attention has been paid to evaluating veterans' of color VR service access and their successful return to work and career outcome rates. Far too often, VR research fails to address these veterans' unique needs.
- Homelessness among veterans has been attributed to the lack of employment. It is estimated that 56% of all homeless veterans are African American or Hispanic/Latino.\*

\* National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (2010). Facts and media page. Author. Retrieved online April 26, 2010 from <http://www.standown.org/homeless.html>

# Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess and evaluate VR access and return to work outcome rates for African American and White veterans with a signed Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).



# Research Questions

1. Is there a difference in VR Access and successful return to work outcome rates for African American versus White veterans with a signed Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) nationally, across the 10 RSA Regions and each state/territorial public VR agency?
2. How do African American veterans' successful return to work rates compare to the National Benchmark?

# Methodology-Sample

- The sample for this study consisted of 13,426 African American and White veterans with a signed IPE closed status 26 or 28 by state VR agencies across the nation during Fiscal Year (FY) 2006 (October 1, 2005, through September 30, 2006).
- Of these 13,426 veterans, 3,286 (24%) were African American and 10,140 were White.
- Overall, males accounted for 11,728 (87%) of participants while there were 1,698 (13%) females in the study sample.
- A total of 2,788 African American male veterans (21%), and 498 African American female veterans (4%) were included in the sample.

# Data Collection and Analysis

- The national FY 2006 RSA-911 database (N = 617,149) was used in this analysis.
- The “veteran” variable only indicates whether the consumer was a veteran (code = 1) or not a veteran (code = 0).
- The data category that was labeled 3 represented one level of the return to work outcome criterion variable. This data category included status 26 only (i.e., “Exited with an employment outcome”), or those veterans who successfully returned to work.

# Data Collection and Analysis

(continued)

- The data categories labeled 4 and 5 were combined to reflect the other level of the criterion--status 28, which indicates that a veteran was not successful in returning to work.
- Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze data. A series of frequency distributions were generated for African American and White veterans' access to services and their successful return to work. Successful return to work outcome percentage rates were also generated for each group.

*National RSA-911 Data on African American Veterans' Access and Return to Work Outcomes- (FY 2006, Status 26 and 28 Closures Only)*

State/Territory (VR) Agency	AA & Whites Vet Access Comparison After IPE Signed- (f)		AA Veterans RTW Successful (N = 1,564)		White Veterans RTW Successful (N = 5,817)	
	AA	White	(f)	%	(f)	%
RSA Region I						
Connecticut (G/C)	5	44	3	60.0	27	61.4
Connecticut (B)	2	4	1	50.0*	4	100.0
Maine (G/C)	0	58	0	0.0*	29	50.0
Maine (B)	0	31	0	0.0*	22	71.0
Massachusetts (G/C)	10	31	7	70.0	23	74.2
Massachusetts (B)	0	9	0	0.0*	7	77.8
New Hampshire (G/C)	0	52	0	0.0*	35	67.3
Rhode Island (G/C)	2	21	1	50.0*	9	42.9
Vermont (G/C)	4	120	3	75.0	69	57.5
Vermont (B)	0	17	0	0.0*	12	70.6
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>65.2</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>61.2</b>

Note: yellow = AA Vet RTW Percentages below White Vet RTW Percentages

\* = AA Vet RTW Percentages below National RTW Averages (54.9)

AA = African American; GC = General/Combined; B = Blind; RTW = Return to Work

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State/Territory (VR) Agency	AA & Whites Vet Access Comparison After IPE Signed- (f)		AA Veterans RTW Successful (N = 1,564)		White Veterans RTW Successful (N = 5,817)	
	AA	White	(f)	%	(f)	%
RSA Region II						
New Jersey (G/C)	179	199	85	47.5*	127	63.8
New Jersey (B)	3	13	2	66.7	9	69.2
New York (G/C)	256	522	150	58.6	307	58.8
New York (B)	4	31	2	50.0*	25	80.6
Puerto Rico (G/C)	1	14	1	100.0	11	78.6
Virgin Islands (G/C)	1	0	1	100.0	0	0.0
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>444</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>241</b>	<b>54.2*</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>61.4</b>

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	AA	White	(f)	%	(f)	%
RSA Region III						
Pennsylvania (G/C)	90	378	51	56.7	241	63.8
Delaware (G/C)	18	30	9	50.0*	17	56.7
West Virginia (G/C)	12	156	4	33.3*	102	65.4
Maryland (G/C)	93	59	57	61.3	34	57.6
Virginia (G/C)	63	94	33	52.4*	52	55.3
Virginia (B)	3	3	1	33.3*	1	33.3
District of Columbia (G/C)	2	0	2	100.0	0	0.0
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>55.8</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>62.0</b>

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	AA	White	<i>(f)</i>	%	<i>(f)</i>	%
RSA Region IV						
Alabama (G/C)	98	86	54	55.1	54	62.8
Florida (G/C)	104	356	50	48.1*	235	66.0
Florida (B)	6	36	3	50.0*	19	52.8
Georgia (G/C)	141	134	71	50.4*	81	60.4
Kentucky (G/C)	64	229	34	53.1*	153	66.8
Kentucky (B)	1	17	1	100.0	14	82.4
Mississippi (G/C)	48	115	34	70.8	94	81.7
North Carolina (G/C)	325	503	120	36.9*	178	35.4
North Carolina (B)	4	5	0	0.0*	4	80.0
South Carolina (G/C)	207	199	115	55.6	123	61.8
South Carolina (B)	1	0	0	0.0*	0	0.0
Tennessee (G/C)	50	122	26	52.0*	42	34.4
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>1,049</b>	<b>1,802</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>48.4*</b>	<b>997</b>	<b>55.3</b>

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State/Territory (VR) Agency	AA & Whites Vet Access Comparison After IPE Signed- <i>(f)</i>		AA Veterans RTW Successful (N = 1,564)		White Veterans RTW Successful (N = 5,817)	
	AA	White	<i>(f)</i>	%	<i>(f)</i>	%
<b>RSA Region V</b>						
Illinois (G/C)	97	245	34	35.1*	133	54.3
Indiana (G/C)	75	693	24	32.0*	483	69.7
Michigan (G/C)	162	388	91	56.2	242	62.4
Michigan (B)	10	20	4	40.0*	15	75.0
Minnesota (G/C)	20	190	10	50.0*	90	47.4
Minnesota (B)	1	11	0	0.0*	5	45.5
Ohio (G/C)	161	559	69	42.9*	373	66.7
Wisconsin (G/C)	58	303	18	31.0*	109	36.0
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>2,409</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>42.8*</b>	<b>1,450</b>	<b>60.1</b>

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	AA	White	<i>(f)</i>	%	<i>(f)</i>	%
RSA Region VI						
Arkansas (G/C)	11	12	1	9.1*	5	41.7
Arkansas (B)	0	11	0	0.0*	8	72.7
Louisiana (G/C)	35	86	9	25.7*	54	62.8
Oklahoma (G/C)	89	304	17	19.1*	80	26.3
New Mexico (G/C)	11	174	8	72.7	122	70.1
New Mexico (B)	1	9	1	100.0	3	33.1
Texas (G/C)	348	954	155	44.5*	509	53.4
Texas (B)	14	66	11	78.6	42	63.6
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>509</b>	<b>1,616</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>39.6*</b>	<b>823</b>	<b>50.9</b>

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	AA	White	f	%	f	%
<b>RSA Region VII</b>						
Iowa (G/C)	9	135	1	11.1*	67	49.6
Kansas (G/C)	52	167	27	51.9*	81	48.5
Missouri (G/C)	44	229	33	75.0	156	68.1
Missouri (B)	4	6	4	100.0	4	66.7
Nebraska (G/C)	20	119	5	25.0*	73	62.9
Nebraska (B)	0	8	0	0.0*	4	71.4
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>664</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>54.2*</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>57.9</b>

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State/Territory (VR) Agency	AA & Whites Vet Access Comparison After IPE Signed- <i>(f)</i>		AA Veterans RTW Successful (N = 1,564)		White Veterans RTW Successful (N = 5,817)	
	AA	White	<i>(f)</i>	%	<i>(f)</i>	%
RSA Region VIII						
Colorado (G/C)	0	7	0	0.0*	3	42.9
Montana (G/C)	1	41	1	100.0	25	61.0
North Dakota (G/C)	1	27	1	100.0	21	77.8
South Dakota (G/C)	0	59	0	0.0*	25	42.4
South Dakota (B)	0	3	0	0.0*	2	66.7
Utah (G/C)	6	224	3	50.0*	141	62.9
Wyoming (G/C)	0	56	0	0.0*	40	71.4
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>417</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>62.5</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>61.6</b>

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	AA	White	<i>(f)</i>	%	<i>(f)</i>	%
RSA Region IX						
Arizona (G/C)	34	215	13	38.2*	85	39.5
California (G/C)	172	528	75	43.6*	269	50.9
Hawaii (G/C)	1	5	0	0.0*	1	20.0
Nevada (G/C)	16	40	11	68.8	33	82.5
Guam (G/C)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>788</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>44.3*</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>49.2</b>

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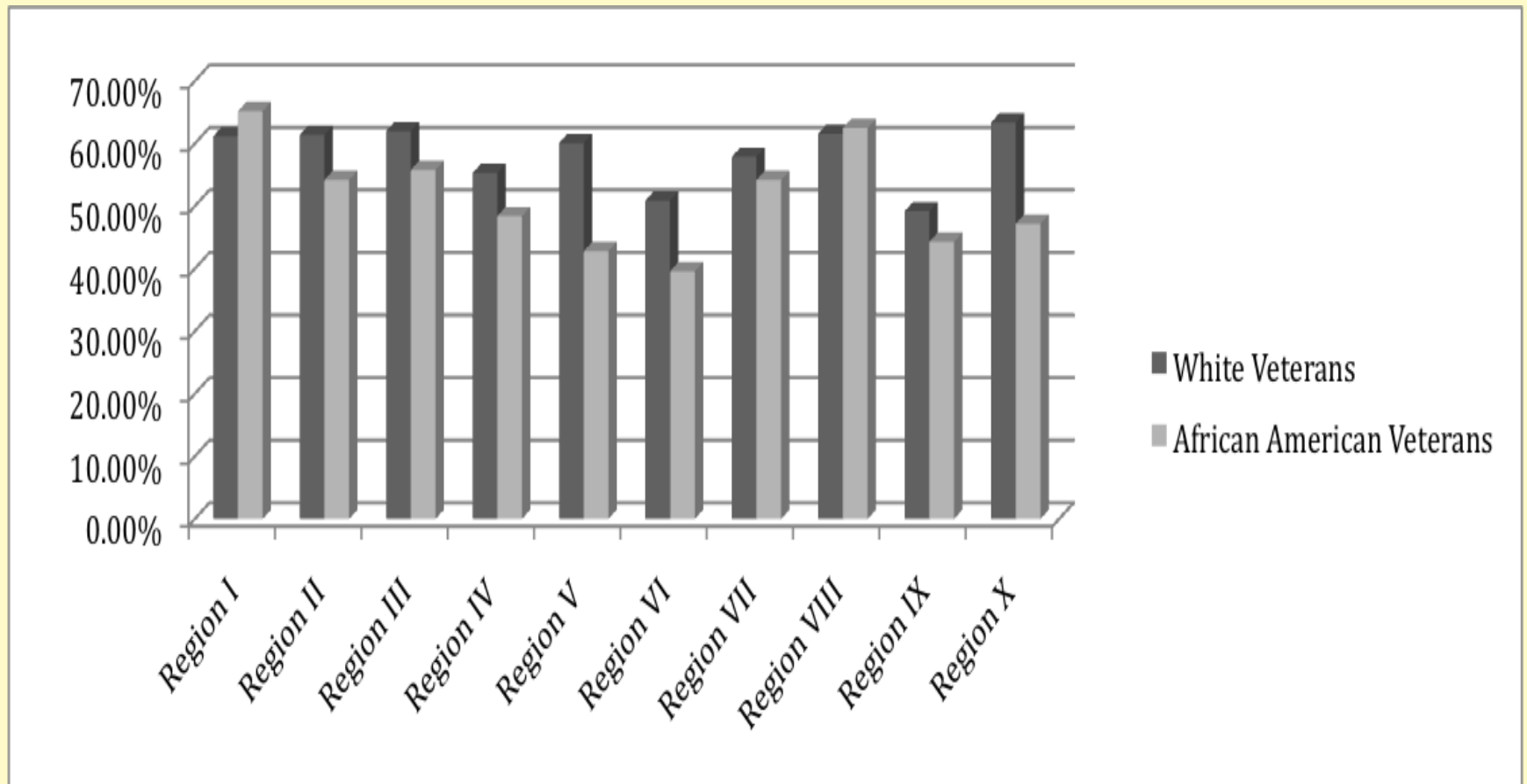
State/Territory (VR) Agency	AA & Whites Vet Access Comparison After IPE Signed- (f)		AA Veterans RTW Successful (N = 1,564)		White Veterans RTW Successful (N = 5,817)	
	AA	White	f	%	f	%
RSA Region X						
Alaska (G/C)	9	61	3	33.3*	32	52.5
Idaho (G/C)	2	143	1	50.0*	97	67.8
Idaho (B)	1	7	1	100.0	6	85.7
Oregon (G/C)	15	252	9	60.0	176	69.8
Oregon (B)	1	6	1	100.0	5	83.3
Washington (G/C)	88	87	2	25.0*	38	43.7
Washington (B)	00	2	0	0.0*	0	0.0
<b>Regional Sub-total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>558</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>47.2*</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>63.4</b>
<b>National Total</b>	<b>3,286</b>	<b>10,140</b>	<b>1,564</b>	<b>47.6*</b>	<b>5,817</b>	<b>57.4</b>
<b>National Benchmark/Average for Successful RTW Rate- All Veterans = 54.9</b>						

Note: yellow = AA Vet RTW Percentages below White Vet RTW Percentages

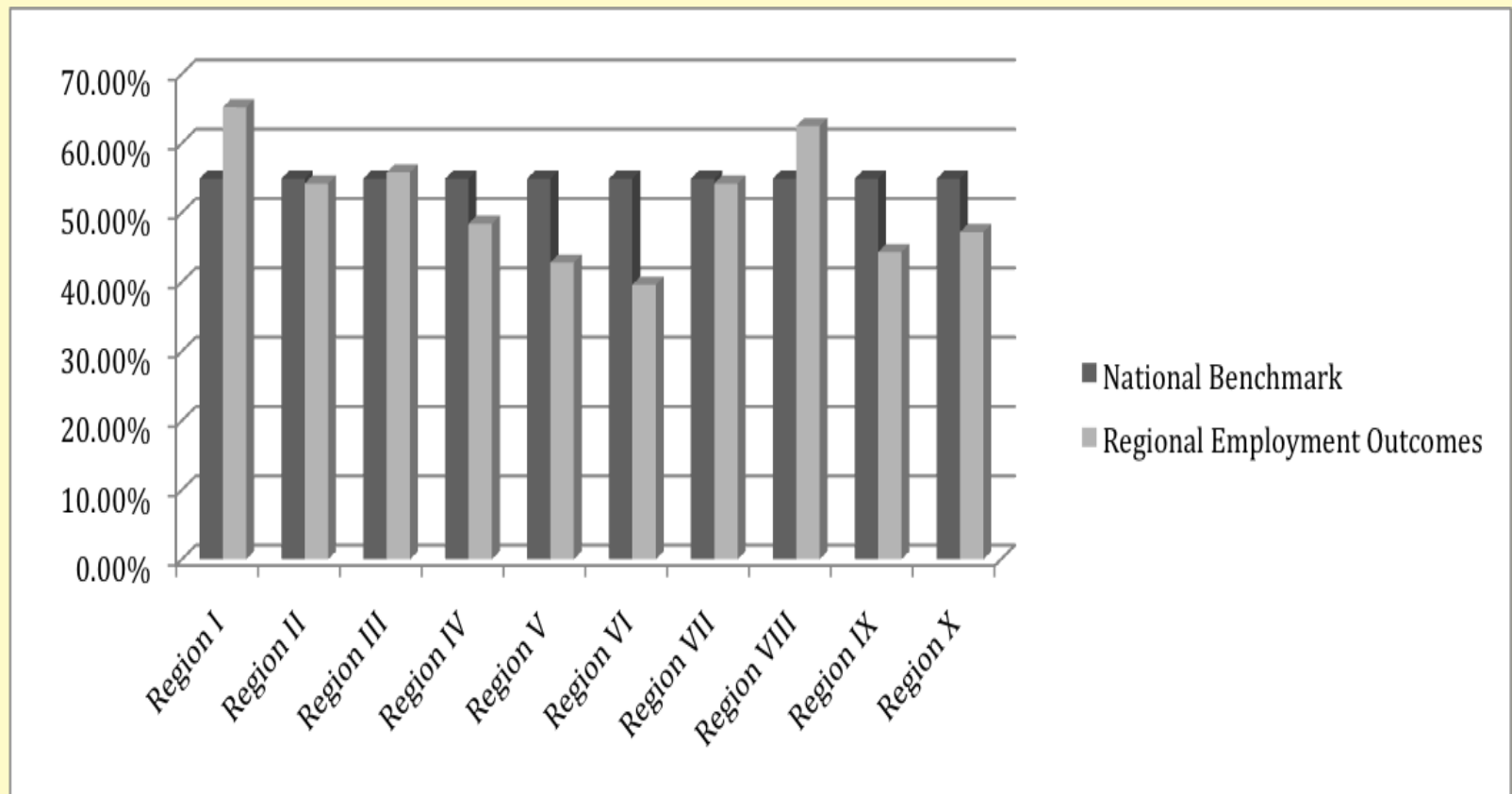
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*Figure 1. RSA Regional Successful Return to Work Outcomes  
(Status 26 Closures Only; N= 7,381)*



*Figure 2. National Benchmark and Regional Successful Return to Work Outcomes among African American Veterans (Status 26 Only; N= 7,381)*





# Summary of Key Observations

- Twelve (12) general/combined or blind VR agencies did not provide access to any ( $N = 0$ ) African American veterans with a signed IPE.
- Nationally African American veterans with signed IPEs (47.6%) were less likely to return to work successfully than White veterans with signed IPEs (57.5%).
- Eight (8) of the 10 RSA regions reflected successful African American Veterans return to work outcome rates that were below success rates for White veterans.

# Summary of Key Observations

(continued)

- Seven (7) out of the 10 RSA regions had successful return to work outcomes rates for African American veterans with IPEs that were below the National Benchmark (54.9%).
- RSA Region VI (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Texas) had the lowest African American successful return to work rate (39.6%).

# Research Gaps and the State of Science

- Research gaps continue to exist in the current State of the Science- *relatively little is known about veterans of color with disabilities' VR access and return to work and the existing and emerging barriers that prevent them from returning to work.*

## **Quantity:**

- Too few studies have comprehensively examined the VR access and return to work rates of veterans of color.
- Relatively little qualitative and quantitatively derived evidence-based research has been done to investigate and identify barriers to VA VR&E program, state VR agency and community rehabilitation program sponsored services among veterans of color.
- Little qualitative or evidence-based inquiry has been done to examine barriers to successful return to work and career advancement among veterans of color.

# Research Gaps and the State of Science

(continued)

## **Quality:**

- Methodological issues relative to the underrepresentation of veterans of color in VR research is problematic for generating findings that can be used to benefit them.
- Too much emphasis historically placed on program-based data collection methods (i.e., agency consumers, review of consumer records), and too little value placed on use of “grass roots” community-based data collection (e.g., participant recruitment in community) and knowledge translation methods (e.g., dissemination linkages to “grass roots” organizations with strong connections to veterans of color, their family members and their communities).

# African American Wounded Warrior Focus Group Findings Informing Future Directions: Outreach Plan

(N=8, Convened October 22, 2010; VA rated Service-Connected disability of at least 20%).

## ➤ Wounded Warrior's Perceptions on Barriers to VR Services

1. Program service information presented primarily in written format (e.g., brochures, pamphlets, websites) limits African American Wounded Warriors' access to Veterans Administration Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, State VR agency, and community rehabilitation program services.
2. Inadequate VR service related outreach and networking opportunities within the African American community limit Wounded Warriors' access to information about VR service benefits.
3. Implications of homelessness such as no permanent address for VR counselor follow-up communication limit African American Wounded Warriors' access to Veterans Administration Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, State VR agency and community rehabilitation program service.
4. Inability to successfully navigate the complexities (e.g., bureaucracy/red tape) of Veterans Administration Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program systems limits Wounded warrior access to service.

# African American Wounded Warrior Focus Group Findings Informing Future Directions: Outreach Plan (continued)

(N=8, Convened October 22, 2010; VA rated Service-Connected disability of at least 20%).

## ➤ Wounded Warriors' Perceptions on Barriers to Return to Work and Career Outcomes

1. Wounded Warriors' skill set [MOS (i.e., Military Occupational Specialty)] acquired during military service often fail to meet the American civilian workforce job market skill set demand.
2. Available Veterans Administration sponsored career counseling resources are often inadequate to support African American Wounded Warriors to write quality Knowledge, Skills and Ability (KSA) statements for Federal job opening and career development.
3. Inadequate educational attainment (e.g., associate, baccalaureate and masters degrees), and licensure and certification opportunities among African American Wounded Warriors limit their ability to reintegrate into the American civilian workforce and advance their careers.
4. Implications of homelessness (e.g., hygiene issues) limit African American Wounded Warriors' successful return to work and career advancement.
5. Improper Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis and subsequent treatment result in psychological instability and thereby limit African American Wounded Warriors' successful return to work and career advancement.

# Future Directions: Outreach Plan

1. There is a need for the VA VR&E Program, State VR agencies and community rehabilitation programs (CPRs) to review and re-tailor, where needed, their outreach policies and practices to include new and promising strategies for more effectively “reaching into” communities of color.
  - Publish advertisements informing veterans of color, especially Wounded Warriors, about programs sponsoring services that lead to competitive integrated employment and career advancement in Black newspapers, and newspapers serving urban populations.
  - Develop and broadcast Public Service Announcements (PSAs) designed to inform veterans of color, especially Wounded Warriors, about the availability of programs that provide services leading to competitive integrated employment and career advancement on Black radio and television stations (e.g., Black Entertainment Television, TV One).
  - Disseminate correspondence to major Black church organizations (e.g., National Baptist Convention of America, African American Episcopal Church, Church of God in Christ) and other community “grass roots” organizations serving communities of color to inform veterans about the availability and benefits of employment assistance programs.

# Future Directions: Research Agenda

2. The VA and Federal funding entities should consider developing future national research and service initiatives to address barriers to accessing VA sponsored, state VR and community rehabilitation program services and successful return to work among veterans of color, especially Wounded Warriors.
  - Fund analysis of secondary RSA-911 database that will inform the research agenda by generating a comprehensive national profile for veterans of color and majority veterans served by state /territorial VR agencies. Variables to be analyzed should include, but not be limited to:

-race/ethnicity,	-gender,
-primary disability	-secondary disability
-employment status at application	-weekly earnings at application
-employment status at closure	-weekly earnings at closure
-type of public support at closure	- type of closure
- reason for closure	



# Future Directions: Research Agenda

(continued)

- Sponsor qualitative research aimed at discovering veterans' of color and VR professionals' perceptions on barriers to VR service access and successful employment and career advancement (e.g., Delphi panels, focus groups).
- Sponsor evidence-based research intended to identify effective strategies for eliminating barriers to VR service access and successful employment and career advancement among veterans of color (e.g., randomized controlled trials/true experimental designs: random selection of subjects, random assignment to control and experimental groups and conditions); especially Wounded Warriors.

# Future Directions: Research Agenda

(continued)

- Incentivize collaborative research partnerships between minority serving institutions, “grass roots” community-based organizations and research entities in an effort to enhance data collection and knowledge translation methods.

# Leveraging Cross Fertilization Opportunities for Enhancing Employment Outcomes Among Veterans of Color

➤ How can we leverage interdisciplinary collaborative opportunities that will lead to improved employment outcomes for veterans of color?

1. Focus group observations indicated that inadequate educational attainment among African American Wounded Warriors limits their ability to return to work successfully and advance their careers. Collaborative partnerships between employment oriented research projects and those addressing educational barriers should be encouraged. The extensive addressing of educational barriers for this target population could lead to enhanced return to work and career outcomes for veterans of color.

2. Focus group findings indicated that improper Posttraumatic Stress Disorder diagnoses and subsequent treatment limit African American Wounded Warriors' ability to successfully return to work or to advance their careers. Collaborations between employment oriented research and mental health research projects could address factors contributing to improper diagnoses and treatment of mental health issues among veterans of color.

# Leveraging Cross Fertilization Opportunities for Advancing Employment Outcomes

(continued)

3. Focus group observations indicated that homelessness was a barrier to successful return to work among African American Wounded Warriors due to issues such as no permanent address and diminished ability to maintain proper hygiene. Collaborative research partnerships between employment oriented projects and projects focused on disability statistics should be encouraged in an effort to identify patterns of homelessness and community participation outcomes among veterans of color. There is a need to identify needed community resources to enhance successful return to work and career outcomes among this target population.

The top of the slide features several overlapping, wavy lines in shades of yellow and orange, creating a decorative header.

# The End